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ABSTRACT

The tradition that promoted "sophia" instead of "philosophia," "oratio" instead of "ratio," and promoted the pursuit of wise decision making based on character has been replaced by a pedagogy that focuses on decision making independent of the role of virtue in making minds up. In courses in argumentation, critical thinking is often taught as if it involves no more than logic or reasoning powers that can be divorced from emotion and desired ends. The orator's tradition is a viable one, and, theoretically, there is good reason to see the sophistic or orator's tradition as amenable to a community based, historically based, non-revealed, non-self-evident set of character standards that are fought for, and with, what Jasper Neel calls, "strong discourse." It is not enough to teach students how to argue, they must be taught "how to be." Composition theory and pedagogy ought to consider carefully whether they promote the tension between self and community, and promote also the idea that how a person behaves (virtue) is always a public gesture conditioned by and subject to public scrutiny. Teaching students to write strong discourse requires a pedagogy and a theory of virtue and character. (Eight notes are included, and 10 references are attached.) (TD)

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Thomas M. Rivers

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Thomas M. Rivers

"Accommodating Virtue: Weak and Strong Discourse"

The thesis of Nancy Sherman's The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue is to "demonstrate that character is inseparable from the operations of practical reason..." (vii). Character has to do with a person's "enduring traits: that is, with the attitudes, sensibilities, and beliefs that affect how a person sees, acts, and indeed lives" (3).

Character is not a matter of a disposition to act in a certain way (there is no certain way) and certainly we can imagine a coward who does not flee, and someone who gains and never gives because they are sincerely motivated supply siders (Meilaender, 8).

These traits of character consist of virtues that do not just "equip us for certain activities, or even for life in general; they influence how we describe the activities in which we engage, what we think we are doing and what we think important about what we are doing" (Meilaender, 11).

These traits of character are, in other words, epistemic. "Discerning the morally salient features of a situation (`to compose the scene') is part of expressing virtue and part of the morally appropriate response" (Sherman, 3).

This epistemic view of virtue does not begin with making choices, "but with recognizing the circumstances relevant to specific ends" (Sherman, 3-4). Such a position reinforces the critical combination of both virtue and decision making in the oratorical tradition of the liberal arts, and the key role it ought to play for those who claim to be adherents to this tradition.[1]

The paradox, of course, is that the very tradition that promoted sophia instead of philosophia, oratio instead of ratio, and promoted the pursuit of wise decision making based on character has been replaced by a pedagogy that focuses on decision making and making up one's mind independent of the role of virtue in making minds up.[2]

In courses in argumentation, we often teach critical thinking as if it is no more than logic or reasoning powers that can be divorced from emotion and desired ends. Certainly, we recognize the limitations of argumentation when we compare it to persuasion, and the value of rhetoric over an arhetorical logic.[3] But, I wonder if we recognize how critical virtue is in even determining whether a situation is in need of resolving?

Ethical reflection which "begins with the decision or intention rather than with the construal of the situation to which the intention is a response begins too far down the line" writes Sherman (26).

For Aristotle and the Greeks, matters of character were public matters, and "an action motivated by the right principle but

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lacking in the right gesture or feeling falls short of the mean; it does not express virtue" (Sherman, 2).

These gestures of virtue are public, not private, and are amenable to public scrutiny and disclosure. "An agent who fails to notice unequivocal features of a situation which for a given community standardly requires considerations of liberality, (or honesty) apparently lacks that virtue. How to see becomes as much a matter of inquiry as what to do" (Sherman, 30).

Sherman grants that a list of virtues that would mark someone of character reflects the political and historical realities of a specific age.[4] Such a recognition is crucial if we are going to argue for virtue and character while avoiding the "dogmatic epistemology" that Bruce Kimball lists as a negative feature of the oratorical tradition. The orator's tradition is, I believe, a viable one, and, theoretically, as Jasper Neel has pointed out, there is every good reason to see the sophistic or orator's tradition as amenable to a community based, historically based, non-revealed, non-self evident, set of character standards that are fought for, and with, what he calls, "strong discourse" (Neel).

Sherman's perspective has direct bearing on our practices as composition teachers. It calls into question writing classes that are centered around agendas or great issues, and where a false kind of objectivity is fostered. Students, in affect, learn to pimp for positions they have already chosen, or see the value of such writing exercises as helping them make their mind up (but not their character). As Richard Lanham notes, in The Motive of Eloquence, changing one's self, or one's audience's sense of self, is the rhetorical way. Changing minds is the philosopher's way (14).

Sherman says that Aristotle did take into account desire. In Aristotle's account of desire it is because "something seems good to us that we desire it, and not that it is good because we desire it" (63). "If we can change how things appear to us, then we are in a position to begin to reform our desires" (Sherman, 64).

Aristotle considers an action virtuous, not merely because it seeks an external result (bravery as necessary to fight a war, or courage to speak out against a popular one), but, also, a matter of agency. Brave has something to do with how one performs. Virtue for its own sake does not exclude a desired external state, but does include a focus on how (Sherman, 114-115).

This how is part of eloquence that is part of the ideal of liberal learning in the oratorical or sophistic tradition. Virtue is necessary for practical reasoning, for pursuing wisdom, but also for expressing it, for combining eloquence and wisdom.

This point cannot be overstated. As indebted as contemporary composition theory is to renewed interest in rhetoric and the

sophistic tradition, it has been most uncomfortable with the place of virtue within this tradition. This is partially due to what Bruce Kimball calls the "dogmatic epistemology" of this tradition and I also believe partially due to a confusion of virtue and character education with ethical and moral issues. Nevertheless, a modern theory of composition that takes much of its history and content from the sophistic tradition needs to accommodate the concept of virtue and character.

It is not enough that we teach our students how to argue, we must teach them <u>how to be</u>. To teach them to argue without considering virtue is to teach them cleverness (Meilaender). And to teach them only cleverness is to avoid commitment to the positions they may have taken or the minds they think they have made up. The language of virtue and character is pedagogically a much more effective way to challenge our students in this regard. Our primary concern ought not to be over their final positions or decisions -- a dogmatic epistemology is no longer possible or profitable). We ought not, nor do we have to, challenge them or support them with verdicts like <u>wrong</u> or <u>right</u>. Rather, we can challenge them by using the language of virtue. Suggest that they are being "unfair" or "intemperate", or "intolerant"; "sentimental" or too "candid" or "frank"; "honest" or "courageous".[5]

"One of the appeals of an ethics of virtue, writes Gary Watson, in an essay entitled "On the Primacy of Character", is that it promises a nonskeptical response to the failure of codification" (454). However, Watson notes that an ethics of virtue, without a theory of virtue, will be nonexplanatory (454). He argues that an ethics of virtue is constituted of the notion of "flourishing", a form of virtue for its own sake. The explanatory factor in an ethics of virtue is, in other words, a theory of excellence (457). Such an explanatory theory is wonderfully and perfectly compatible with virtue as understood and practiced within the sophistic tradition.

One difficulty one must face up to with such an ethic is that living a characteristically human life seems problematic since we despair of anything like an essentialist human nature. The solution, of course, is not to appeal to something essential, but to something traditional. And to appeal to tradition, to appeal to what is here and now, to recognize, as Lanham does in linking Protagoras to rhetorical man, that "nothing is aught till it is valued" (4). Rhetoric takes the field in the realm of the probable, not in the realm of the universal and the timeless. It takes the field, not with what Lanham calls "centered man", but in a community where a conventional set of virtues and values can be referred to, committed to, and fought for.

In any case, an ethics of virtue is practical. A bad reputation or a credible or incredible <u>ethos</u> is an advantage or disadvantage in a world where no truths are self-evident. It reminds us that concern with virtue is part of our job--not something added on that can be called ethics or morality, that we either feel is

none of our business, not relevant, or not our competency.

It makes sense that some have made connections between writing and personality. For instance, there are studies of basic writers that have focused on developing self-esteem. And it makes sense that researchers in this area make disclaimers about not getting involved in individual therapy and individual personality disorders. But it would have made no sense to Isocrates, or Quintilian (and I am arguing that it ought to make no sense to us today) to say that a student who presents a character disorder, who is vicious instead of virtuous, is none of our business. There is no shrink to send such a student to. We're it.

This doesn't mean it is easy. Consider, for example, recent work in gender and ethics. Criticisms of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning (which were not stages in moral behavior) have noted that women, who have apparently bogged down at the level of conventional moralizing, have in fact exhibited virtue--a desire to accommodate, to care and to maintain relationships. This perspective has another layer of complexity, however, if you consider the possibility that this virtue of "caring" is problematized because the situations that have fostered it may have been cohersive and part of a systematic upbringing that fostered "agreeableness" (Card). Viewing virtue as epistemic allows us to see that maintaining relationships out of fear, out of bad habit, and misperceiving certain situations as requiring such agreeableness is no virtue at all. There is a big difference between "caring" and "agreeable". A world of difference. An epistemic difference.

And certainly we have all struggled with our students' struggle to unravel the complexities of honesty--to know when silence is golden or yellow. When reticence is a virtue and when frankness is a vice. They must learn the convention based aspects of honesty, and an awareness that our obligations toward honest knowing and honest telling exist only within the constraints of agreed to understandings (Baier, 270). Consider too the gender issue of the "strong silent male" and the "talkative" female" and the difficulty, or even desirability, in freeing one's self from such myths and stereotypes.

Certainly, an ethics of virtue, as part of the oratorical tradition <u>and</u> practiced today, presupposes that a university be viewed as a community, and not merely a place where one collects credits. For instance, one calls for the virtues of <u>honesty</u> and <u>tolerance</u> in this context. I take honesty to be the premier virtue of citizens within an academic community. Lack of honesty could range from the obvious breach of standards--plagiarism--to the more typical and insidious form it takes as mere "sincerity", which is easy virtue, and only requires that one write or say what they think even if what they think reflects no thinking or virtue at all.[6] It is not a matter of disagreeing with a student's conclusion, declaring it right or wrong, but a matter of virtue, a matter of <u>how</u> members of the academic community are to proceed.

Sherman points out that Aristotle's person of character is not merely self-sufficient and that character friendships ,or friends of the good, are an essential feature of character formation (125). Universities in this sense need to be understood as character friendships and an excessively Platonic perspective argues too much for going it alone. In Kimball' terms, individuality is a feature of the liberal-free ideal and is juxtaposed against the sophistic traditions stress on community. It is ironic, indeed, when looked at in this light, that recent clamors against a decline in standards have been made in the name of Plato (Alan Bloom).

The virtues that are at stake here are not those of different drummers, nor the seize-the-day philosophy of the recent film The Dead Poets Society. I liked the film insofar as it revealed the tension that Kimball says ought to exist between community and authority, and individual freedom to do your own thing. My point would be that, given the context of the film and the larger social context of filmgoers no real tension exists. The McChoakumchild pedagogy of the headmaster does not stand in a meaningful contrast to the sympathetic "seize-the-day" pedagogy of the hero.

Composition theory and pedagogy ought to carefully consider whether it promotes this tension between self and community, and promotes that how one behaves (virtue) is always a public gesture conditioned by and subject to public scrutiny. Selves do not exist independent of others and divorced from community standards. Knowing who one is, is in a sense knowing how one is.

All of this presupposes that character is not frozen, that habituation is all that character entails. In Sherman's approach to Aristotle, virtue is not mechanical and is not non-rational. It is not some prior given or even some prior platonic "vision" before knowledge of the good. It is epistemic--it partakes of the perceptual, affective, and deliberative. In other words, cultivating virtue is part of the rational process of deliberation. Not only is ethos revealed and developed in telling, it is expressed and cultivated in knowing.

Sherman is writing about appropriateness and appropriateness as Aristotle notes in his Rhetoric is part of what a rhetorician is trained to know. Part of the deliberative process is to see the particular circumstances that here and now make certain emotions appropriate. Part of the training of an orator is "...to familiarize the orator with the sorts of beliefs that typically accompany the different emotions....Emotions have cognitive components" (Sherman, 170).

Pedagogically, Sherman proposes a solution to whether we ought to have our students write "hot" or whether it is better to write dispassionately or "cold". To have our students write "hot", to be committed (which is a feature of the orator's tradition, see Crowley) is proper, as long as it is understood to be about

virtue and character, and that they could be transformed by this process, that they could not only change their mind, but change how they are. Writing dispassionately or objectively, or "cold" merely perpetuates the myth of logic and rhetoric as mere skills and deflects attention away from the character forming aspects of strong discourse. Reasoning is flawed if it ignores virtue and virtue or desire is flawed if it ignores reasoning.

To teach virtue is not to teach right opinion--explicit teaching of virtue involves no procedure per se--what is passed on are "ways of reacting, seeing, and understanding which will aim at establishing enduring patterns of action" (Sherman, 181). Judgments about our students decisions cannot be prescribed. But they can be circumscribed, because it is part of our job to judge attitude and to persuade our students that attitude matters--for their knowledge of subject, for their relationship to their audience, and for its own sake.

Deconstruction, as it has been understood by composition theorists and teachers, has, for the most part, allied itself with the orator's tradition or the sophistic tradition. Jasper Neel, in Plato, Derrida, and Writing, points out both Plato and Derrida are still about philosophy and Neel believes that rhetoric must free itself from philosophy. Whether the pursuit of truth is possible and a never ending quest or whether it is an impossible never ending quest, rhetoric must make do with now.[8]

Humans must deal in probabilities and rhetoric is the key to discovering the probable. The sophists offer a rhetoric for situations. Unlike Derrida, Neel writes, the sophists allow themselves to be persuaded by an argument, while never forgetting the deceitful foundation that enabled the argument (207). Deconstructive writing theorists certainly seem uncomfortable with that part of the sophistic tradition that concerned itself with standards and moral education. But if one can see that the dogmatic epistemology of revealed truths, of universal standards, and of appeals to timeless notions of common sense does not necessarily lead to such an epistemology, then one can move deconstructive writing theory fully into the camp of the sophistic tradition.

Such a move would entail a theory of virtue and its relevance to weak and strong discourse-- terms borrowed from the last chapter of Neel's book, in which he overrides or overwrites both Plato and Derrida.

Neel wants to liberate composition studies from philosophy. But even after liberation he writes, "writers need the platonic ideal, the notion of the forever-absent truth toward which discourse moves. At the same time, writers need deconstructive strategy to prevent any discourse from presenting itself as the truth" (203).

Neel makes the same distinction that Sherman does in calling into question reasoning strategies that are divorced from a concern

with virtue and commitment (Neel calls them anti-writing along with writers who write only to master form). Sophistry is a way to make choices in a world of probability. Rhetoric persuades its user and others, private and public. In other words, writes Neel, sophistry, in conjunction with rhetoric and writing, is the process whereby the individual develops an ethical self" (207).

What sophistry allows is democracy (Neel,208). What is required is citizenship in that community. Citizenship is not a matter of prescribed votes, but a matter of introspection and circumspection. Its a matter of habit, a matter of how, a matter of virtue, a matter of character.

Weak discourse for Neel is private discourse, discourse where there is no public testing, where testimonials don't matter. Strong discourse for Neel is tolerant of other discourse and welcomes other strong discourse with the presupposition that strong discourse will beat weak discourse. To teach students to write strong discourse requires a pedagogy and a theory of virtue and character. Not to do so is to promote weak character --or deform character-- and risk weak discourse.

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Notes

1. Bruce Kimball, in Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education, argues that much of the difficulty in promoting an understanding of liberal education is due to a failure in understanding two distinct forms of liberal education: the pursuit of the philosophers who held that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was the highest good (exemplified by Plato), and the pursuit of the orators who held that public expression and the building of community and citizenship and character was the highest good. Kimball notes that distinguishing traits of the orator's tradition of liberal education includes, along with other traits, the combination of both character training and decision making. In the orator's tradition one was not merely "free" to decide, but, rather, one became "free" by first of all taking part in a rigorous education that promoted virtue and character. The orator's tradition, or the sophistic tradition, in other words, also recognized the link between free choice and virtue. Many who embrace the sophistic tradition, however, seem reluctant to acknowledge the essential linkage between virtue training, free choice and decision making.

2. Gilbert Meilaender, in The Theory and Practice of Virtue, makes a good case against approaching the moral life from the point of view of difficult moral decisions (a fairly common approach taken in courses in argumentation). Decision making cannot proceed honestly if it is divorced from virtue. The apparent attack against decision making or making up one's own mind seems to be a feature of conservative educators, but the labeling of "conservative", particularly as a pejorative one, can be better understood if it is seen, not as an attack against self-determination, but rather, as a sophisticated understanding of what constitutes self and what constitutes decision making.

3. We have certainly come a long way since we used to teach the informal fallacies as if they were the final word in argumentation. There certainly is logic in recognizing that an "ad hominem" argument proves nothing with certainty, but in the realm of the probable, an "ad hominem" argument is a legitimate way to expose character and challenge the credibility of anyone's testimony.

4. I would stipulate honesty, courage, love, humility, and hope as the virtues constitutive of a citizen of a university. They are stipulated virtues, not self-evident, universal, or ahistorical. Honesty, for instance would not be a prime virtue of a "citizen" of Homer's Greece, nor would humility. For the Romans the pursuit of praise was considered praise worthy. Humility, on the other hand is an essential virtue of christianity and the virtue of love would be more central for citizenship within a religious community. And though honesty may be the best policy within the business community, loyalty and optimism may be more essential traits for membership in this community.

5. There is a group of writing teachers who, in fact, already use virtue pedagogy--creative writing teachers. They are not loath to

praise or blame a particular poem or story for the strengths or weaknesses of character that account for the quality of a piece. I believe that one explanation for this is that creative writing teachers respect the "authorship" of their students more and instinctively recognize what the ancient Greeks did--you cannot separate discourse from virtue. If we believe we are only teaching a skill and a series of conventions for a certain kind of discourse then it becomes easy to not privilege the author, the person who is behind and within the text we are evaluating.

6. I use an example in all my writing classes of an author for a national magazine who traveled to Tokyo with the idea of preparing a travel guide to the city. His first "sincere" response to the city was to throw up his hands in despair at the lack of order (except for the very westernized and modern downtown area) in Tokyo. But as an "honest" knower he questioned his own so-called objectivity and came better to understand his subjective contribution--his highly westernized, geometric notion of order--and added to his understanding of urban order the biomorphic sense of order of oriental cultures. His proper composing of the scene both revealed and expressed the virtue of honesty and its epistemic role.

7. Many so-called conservative segments of our society have recognized the value of heretofore questionable philosophies that appear to be advocating a destructive relativism. Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of religion at Duke University, writes that "deconstructionists are saying what we Christians should have been saying all along: there is no objective knowledge apart from the tradition that sustains it" (29).

8. Neel's position closely parallels that of Richard Lanham who distinguishes between "homo rhetoricus", who is a social self, and "homo seriosus" who is a "centered" self. Both Plato and Derrida are in the "homo seriosus" tradition.

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